HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Peter N. Stearns, Ph.D.

THE GOVERNMENT IN HISTORY – Early Modern Period

Contents

Government in the Early Modern Period

Gunpowder empires The early modern period, 1450-1750, saw the emergence of an unprecedented number of major empires. These included the overseas colonial holdings of the major European powers in the Americas plus a few parts of Asia and Africa, but also new, land-based empires in Russia, India and the Middle East. The contrast with the previous period, where the imperial form was more unusual and emphasis rested on the large number of decentralized regional regimes, was striking. The common denominator was the use of guns to conquer new domains. But this thrust also involved a challenge, to figure out how to administer the holdings once acquired. Hence, an unusual opportunity to explore innovations in government. At the same time, it is important to recognize the very different durabilities of the new empires: Mughal and Safavid empires rose and fell within the period, in contrast to the greater staying power of the Ottomans and, even more, of Russia – here is an interesting comparative topic.

Empire and nation Most of the new empires were what would now be called multinational: this was particularly true in the Middle East. But the early modern period also saw the emergence of suggestions of the nation-state – a state in which political and proclaimed cultural boundaries coincided. (Historians debate whether nations go back earlier in time; certainly there were suggestions of a nation in the much earlier Jewish state, or in China.) Emerging nation states were particularly notable in Europe, but Japan – another center of considerable political change – began to assume some characteristics as well. Nationalism was not yet in play, with its greater challenge to any multinational ideal, but the makings of a debate over the relationship of state and culture was arguably taking shape.

Religion Religious functions for government had been a striking feature of the postclassical period, though with precedents earlier. These did not disappear. The Russian government maintained important roles in the Orthodox Church. China's government continued to avoid any single religious commitment, but it certainly saw the regulation of religion as a key function. Even more obviously, religious functions loomed large in the three great Islamic empires. On the whole, however, religious roles began to ease a bit. This was most obvious in Western Europe, where the exhaustion of the religious wars led to the introduction of greater (though still limited) tolerance and a definite reorientation of the state toward other functions (though religious duties remained). Some historians believe that the Islamic empires, by failing to make a turn away from religion toward some of the newer issues in world affairs, made a crucial mistake.

Modernity? The label early modern suggests, accurately, that this period saw the emergence of more "modern" characteristics in world history – for example, a measurable movement toward greater globalization – but with the huge qualification that this was still early. This tension certainly applies to government. Some governments began to take on some new functions – for example, in education or in economic infrastructure. Peter the Great, Russia's great ruler in the period, is typically called a "modernizer" in Russian history books. But the label should be used with huge caution. Governments were still constrained by economies that were still largely agricultural. Most still defined their functions in

terms of military activities (defensive or aggressive or both), judicial activities and public works (plus, sometimes, religion). There were only limited breakthroughs beyond this.

Western Europe This was a period of major change in European governments, as the next chapter details. Feudalism declined, state functions expanded; and European states became involved in greater military competition, within Europe and around the world. But while many key developments were new in European history – the expansion of state bureaucracies, for example – they were not all pathbreaking at the global level. European patterns partly represented an effort to catch up to government features that had already been established elsewhere, most obviously in China (and some Europeans were aware of this contrast). Identifying genuine innovations is something of a challenge, though there are some opportunities. In other words, any sense of a special place for Europe in the analysis of early modern governments may be misplaced. The region's fundamental innovations rested more in the realm of military technology, trade expansion and cultural change.

Study questions

1. What are some major differences between government trends in this period and those that predominated in the postclassical centuries?
2. What is a multinational empire? A nation state?
3. Why might religion decline somewhat as a government focus?

Further reading

Peter N. Stearns, *World Past to World Present* (Routledge, 2021)

Merry Wiesner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Western Europe

Decline of feudalism In many regions, the powers of monarchs and central governments expanded at the expense of regional feudalism. The process actually began with Renaissance Italian city states, where the feudal system had never taken strong root. By the 16th century a number of northern rulers were expanding their functions (the term Renaissance monarchs is sometimes used), including gaining fuller control over military activities. Growing use of canon reduced the options for feudal armies. Nobles retained important powers and functions, continuing to provide much of the bureaucracy including military leadership. But other bureaucrats were recruited as well, and in places like France ennobled bureaucrats stood alongside the more traditional "nobility of the sword".

Religion The Protestant Reformation and then the religious wars gave governments new religious functions – but in the long run reduced the political role of religion. Different rulers devoted massive time and resources to the support of one or another of the religious factions, through the middle of the 17th century. In Lutheran regions, the state supported the church directly, appointing leading clerics and providing financing; the same became true for the Anglican church in Britain. Calvinists and Catholics remained somewhat more separate; but the Catholic church found it needed to accept more state support, particularly in France. But the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) in Europe and then the religious settlement in Britain (1688) reduced religious strife, and some measure of tolerance developed in places like Holland, England and even Lutheran Prussia. Religion no longer became an explicit cause of war within Europe – a huge change – and government interest in other functions expanded.

Colonial expansion First with Portugal and Spain, but soon with several other countries colonial expansion and policy became a growing government concern. Support for navies and naval ventures grew. In Britain and Holland, and to an extent France, private companies actually conducted the trade and even a good bit of the military activity, with state support. The bureaucracies of East India companies, with thousands of staff members recruited increasingly for aptitude rather than family connections, innovated more quickly than many governments did – providing something of a model in the process. And of course colonial expansion was a major source of new revenue.

Mercantilism and war By the 17th century, mercantilist doctrine became fashionable. Mercantilists assumed that countries were locked in competition, and that gains for one meant losses for another.

Frequent warfare became a weapon in this competitive process, but economic policy was a vital component as well. Mercantilists urged governments to promote expansion of the internal economy and its export prowess, seeking to limit imports except as they came from the country's colonies. France became the clearest exemplar of mercantilist policy, as the state set new regulations for manufacturing while also cutting back internal tariffs to promote a national market. But Britain played the game as well, for example introducing high tariffs on Indian cotton cloth in 1733 to protect Britain's own infant industry. Governments began to pay much greater attention to road and canal building, particularly in the 18th century. While religious wars ended, other kinds of warfare remained a central function of kings and their governments – overseas and within Europe as well. France, particularly, conduced recurrent series of wars in the later 17th and early 18th centuries, expanding territory and reducing the military capacity of neighboring regions such as (decentralized) Germany.

Absolute monarchy By the 17th century a number of monarchs began claiming absolute power – as with the famous "I am the state" quote by France's Louis XIV. The nobility was further trimmed: Louis built his great Versailles palace to preoccupy nobles with court functions and intrigues, distracting them from their regional base. Other rulers in central Europe soon followed this lead. The central state began sending representatives to the provinces to exercise government functions directly. Bureaucracies expanded and became more specialized, with businessmen recruited to head up financial units – a process some have called bureaucratic rationalization. New functions gained attention, besides the greater attention to military and public works ventures (plus more systematic taxation). Many governments set up scientific academies to promote research. The French also established an institute to watch over the purity of the French language. From the Renaissance onward, promotion of the arts became a standard monarchical function. Some governments even began to build larger prisons, creating new options for the punishment of crimes. Military policy itself showed the growing role of the state. Officer ranks were more carefully defined; armies began to arrange their own provisions, rather than living off the land; uniforms and other insignia were standardized; medical care and even pensions were organized. In all this the power of medieval parliaments declined: they were often not called into sessions for many decades, though regional assemblies persisted.

The parliamentary option In the Netherlands, independent after 1648, and ultimately in Britain a different monarchical form developed, though some of the functional changes were put in place as well. Parliamentary power was enhanced and earlier limitations were eased: most notably, the legislatures began to meet regularly rather than depending on royal summons. Contests for parliamentary votes became more important, and the monarchs themselves, depending on parliamentary approval for funding, appointed ministers of state from the leading parliamentarians—some of whom gained a greater policy role than the kings themselves. The notion of limited monarchy and a representative legislative assembly drew approval from intellectuals even in countries like France. Europe was at this point divided on how the government should be organized. In no case were parliaments democratic (though a hint of democratic arguments did emerge in the 17th-century English civil wars). Voting right were limited to a segment of the properties group, and aristocratic upper houses had considerable power. In England, the government also sponsored a revision of the Poor Law; while welfare was not yet seen as a major state function, it did get some attention.

Enlightened despotism In Prussia and Austria in the 18th century, reforming monarchs carried the ideas of absolute monarchy a step further, arguing that the king and his state should take on a variety of new measures to improve society. They revised law codes to limit excessive punishments. They sponsored new technologies and new crops, seeking to stimulate economic growth. This was a brief and limited experiment, but it furthered the general process of partially reconsidering the functions of the state (though many enlightened despots were also eager warriors).

Education Education expanded rapidly in early modern Europe, but not primarily because of state responsibility. However, the state did become involved, setting the basis for what would be a more substantial redefinition of the government and its contact with ordinary citizens in the 19th century. In several Protestant countries the government directed religious authorities to expand schools, providing funding – this was true in Scandinavia and Scotland most notably; and in return for support they participated in setting standards and inspecting outcomes. In Prussia after the mid-18th century, Frederick the Great sketched a full school system, with attendance requirements, state-sponsored examinations

and support for teacher training. This was a striking innovation. Many governments also set up new training institutes for bureaucrats. Most governments in the 18th century provided formal training for military officers, particularly those dealing with artillery, navigation and fortification. France established schools for civil engineers (Roads and Bridges).

Political theory and public opinion From the religious wars onward, debates over appropriate government forms and functions became a major intellectual preoccupation. A growing number of intellectuals, particularly by the time of the 18th-century Enlightenment, urged governments to shake off religion and establish greater tolerance. They urged new freedoms for press and assembly. They sought more rational and limited punishments for crimes. While many intellectuals supported enlightened despotism and the idea of government activity for the public good, there was also interest in parliaments and some talk of democracy. Something like a discipline of political science took shape. At the same time, growing literacy and greater prosperity encouraged some portion of the general public to begin to take an interest in political matters. Something like a measurable public opinion emerged, capable of putting pressure on governments. Thus a sporadic campaign against slavery and the slave trade generated petitions with tens of thousands of signatures, as well as marches and other manifestation, from the mid-18th century onward. Here were important new factors in the conduct of government.

Nation state Obviously, Europe did not develop a unified government – nor were there significant efforts in that direction. The expansion of government and limitations on feudalism did however create a clearer outline of the nation state—a government that would cover a cultural region, with mutual interaction and support between culture and politics. (Note that definitions of national culture are always partially invented and artificial.) More efficient governments thus created more effective national frontiers, as between France and Spain. Sponsorship of a more national market and national literatures moved in the same direction. The nation state idea was not yet fully articulated, partly because so many monarchs claimed that they owned the state, but it was germinating – along with the recurrent wars that pitted states against each other. At the same time, however, recurrent conferences, beginning with Westphalia, further the idea that the rulers of European nation states could also periodically talk with each other to resolve or reduce conflict.

Study questions

1. In what ways did feudalism decline and what were the results?
2. What were the most important changes in government functions?
3. What were the main features, respectively, of absolutist and parliamentary monarchies?
4. Was Europe becoming a cluster of nation states?

Further reading

Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: religious conflict and the practice of toleration in early modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe,* v. I (3rd ed., Norton, 2009)

E.N.Williams, *The Ancien Regime in Europe: government and society in the major states, 1848-1789* (Pimlico, 1999)

Government in the Americas

Overall Spain's rather rapid conquest of much of Latin America and the Caribbean posed an obvious challenge for government, after a few decades in which conquerors like Columbus had a fairly free hand. The Spanish began to organize a response by the first decade of the 16th century, and ultimately laid out a rather comprehensive administrative framework (Portugal did similarly in Brazil, somewhat later). But the colonial government was plagued by the problem of finding enough bureaucratic personnel. It also suffered from the concentration on turning a profit (and the related temptation of local officials to enrich themselves). The Spanish did bring government to many regions that had lacked the structure previously, and they introduced some new efforts at justice. Their efforts also left an important legacy for the region even later on, when independence was achieved.

Structure As soon as the Spanish crown realized the potential wealth of the Americas, it began to trip to tighten its grip. A new Chamber of Commerce (House of Trade) was established in 1504, along with other regulations designed to make sure that Spain controlled all trade to the from the new colonies (though piracy and smuggling complicated this effort over time). The Chamber also tried to make sure that Spaniards who emigrated were Christians of long standing, organized taxation on trade, keeping elaborate records. Governors for each region were appointed directly by the monarchy, with some subordinate officials for particular tasks; they had military as well as civil powers. Quickly also, from 1511, the Spanish set up a network of judicial courts (*audiencias),* taking this function very seriously. By mid-century two viceroyalties were set up (in Mexico and Peru), though this was expanded in the 18th century. Various officials were also dispatched to oversee taxation. Finally, as revenues expanded, other officials were hired to administer subregions within the viceroyalties. Administrative responsibilities deliberately overlapped, as the monarchy sought to avoid too much concentration of power in any one office. And inspectors were periodically dispatched to check on colonial officials as well.

Personnel While major officials were drawn from the Spanish nobility (care was taken not to create a privileged nobility in the Americas), staffing beneath that level could be a problem. The Spanish expanded their universities to generate more personnel. Over time, colonials of Spanish origin were also appointed to mid-level posts. But from the outset clergy were widely used as well, sometimes doubling up in their functions. And key functions were largely handled by the church in any event. Thus a series of universities were established in the Americas, with royal authorization but run by (often rivalrous) religious orders. At the local level many new cities replicated administrative structures from Spain, including a town council. But where indigenous local institutions existed they were also utilized, staffed by the indigenous noble class – though these units declined in importance as disease decimated the local population. Finally, by the 17th century fiscal constraints prompted the government to put a number of positions up for sale, which obviously weakened the quality and independence of government and created greater changes for nepotism and self-interest. Even the Peruvian vice-royalty was up for sale at one point.

Justice and rights Spanish monarchs took the task of governing the indigenous population seriously, at least in principle. Conversion to Christianity was an explicit function of the colonial state, but neither the state nor the church pressed too hard – relatively few trials for heresy occurred, for example. Peaceful conversion was the key goal, with some latitude for a fusion between traditional beliefs and the Catholic faith From key missionaries came reports of mistreatment of the native population by early conquerors, including effective enslavement, and the state began to move against this with the Law of Burgos, 1512-3, which forbade indigenous slavery. A variety of laws sought to follow this up, and in 1550-1 a formal debate (in Valladolid) was conducted about the rights of colonial peoples, the first of its kind in Europe and, according to some historians, an early milestone in generating ideas of human rights. The worst abuses were curbed, prompting a settler revolt which was put down.

Limits on authority The effective authority of the state was limited in many ways, beginning with the issues of personnel. Missions established by various religious orders had sweeping powers in their region, including control over labor. While the most exploitative estate system was tamed, colonial landowners continued to run the haciendas with little oversight into their treatment of local labor. Indigenous people did sometimes take complaints to courts, but their success was limited and only a handful of abuses were directly contested at all.

Bourbon reforms In the mid-18th century, under a new royal dynasty in Spain, the government sought to regain greater state control. Creoles, or locals of European origins, were largely removed from administrative posts, replaced by officials from Spain. The state also sought to restrict the powers of the Church, with somewhat less effect – this would be a lingering issue in Latin American politics. (Similar moves occurred in Portuguese Brazil.) These reforms improved administrative quality and also promoted economic growth, but also created massive grievances among the Creoles, the setting from which independence movements would ultimately emerge.

British North America The British government took a far lighter role in the administration of its colonies than Spain did. Several colonies were established and administered by trading companies. Settlers themselves set up local governments, often with a legislative assembly. This provided some colonists with a more consistent political experience than was true in Latin America by the 18th century. At the same

time, as in Latin America, actual government functions were often quite limited, giving great power to groups such as the slaveholding planters in the South.

Study questions

1. What were the main challenges the Spanish faced in establishing colonial administration?
2. What were the principal purposes and effects of the Bourbon reforms?
3. How did the Spanish government seek to deal with the indigenous population? What were the constraints involved?

Further reading

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Russia

Expansion From the effort to remove Mongol control, a new Russian state formed around the princes of Moscow, one of whom would soon claim the title of Caesar (tsar). This was an expansionist state, focused particularly on pushing into Central Asia – where, along with Chinse and Ottoman gains – nomadic peoples were subject to formal governments for the first time. But military expansion also took Russia westward, where it would soon become a factor in European affairs. And expansion also moved east, reaching the Pacific. The result, gradually, was one of the great land empires in world history, which raised obvious questions about territorial government. Russia began to border other great powers, such as the Ottomans, China and east-central European states like Poland. This heightened the state’s focus on military strength and recurrent expansion.

Tsar and aristocracy In the Caesarian tradition, tsars claimed great power. Control over the Orthodox Church was a major source of support, and periodically the government sought to introduce a variety of religious reforms. But the tsar also claimed a legacy from the khans, to appeal for support from the Muslim minority. From the 16th century onward, the government also issued important codes of law. However, in fact, the great empire was governed in a rather decentralized fashion, with great reliance on the nobility as sources of bureaucrats and military leaders, but also local rule through serfdom. Serfdom had spread initially as peasants sought landlord protection from the Mongols, but now it became more extensive, giving landlords political as well as economic control. Nobles progressively gained greater rights to punish recalcitrant serfs, while overseeing local courts of law. Overall, Russian government involved a careful tension between tsarist claims and military control, and the power of the aristocracy. Recurrent quarrels occurred, as tsars sought to punish powerful nobles or nobles revolted; but on the whole the aristocracy accepted an obligation for loyal state serves, particularly in the military, in return for controlling their estates. The central government had some loyal professional bureaucrats as well, while a council represented the aristocracy informally. Great attention was devoted to taxing peasants and merchants, who were carefully regulated. Finally, from the late 16th century onward, the tsar developed a secret police force, later called the Okhrana, to identify and suppress opponents of the regime, often through torture. This was a pattern that would continue in Russian government through a variety of subsequent regimes.

Later reforms At the end of the 17th century Peter the Great introduced a series of reforms, often labeled modernization. He introduced new controls over the aristocracy, among other things requiring them to adopt Western dress and hairstyles. He cut back the old council, relying on a new, smaller body instead. And he recruited more bureaucrats from the small middle class, reducing reliance on aristocratic service. He also sought to improve the training of the aristocrats themselves, requiring education in mathematics and other subjects. And he further subordinated the church. His model was Western absolutism, and he

did regularize the definition of some government offices. He also launched a new scientific academy and the first universities in Russia. With all this, government structure was not modified too fundamentally. Aristocrats' powers over serfs expanded still further, including the possibility of capital punishment. Emphasis on military expansion continued, with often frantic efforts to assure necessary tax revenue. In the 18th century Catherine the Great would continue cultural outreach to the West, but she also set up a censorship system to regulate access to Western books, seeking to avoid the increasingly controversial political ideas stemming from the Enlightenment.

Study questions

1. In what ways did the government depend on the aristocracy?
2. What were the main functions of the Russian state?
3. What was the main thrust of Peter the Great's government reforms?

Further reading

Nicholas Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia* (9th ed.,Oxford University Press, 2018)

Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (Yale University Press, 1998)

The Middle East: the Ottoman and Safavid Empires

Overview The Ottoman empire took shape in the 14th and 15thn centuries, as Ottoman Turks established leadership and expanded a network of conquests in the Balkans and present-day turkey, ultimately, in 1453, seizing Constantinople and effectively destroying the Byzantine Empire. Conquests continued for many decades, expanding the empire to Egypt and North Africa, the Mediterranean coast, and the entire Balkan region. Safavid conquests pressed into Iran in the early 16th century, creating another major Middle Eastern empire and a tense border with the Ottomans that gave rise to recurrent warfare. The Ottoman empire survived far longer than the Safavids, who faded by the early 18th century; Ottoman rule, ultimately outlasting the duration of the Roman empire, extended into the 20th century though amid increasing constraints.

Military recruitment Both empires came to depend heavily on military forces raised from Christian territories. The Safavids utilized slave soldiers brought in from Russia, some of whom gained great political influence. The Ottomans raised a significant military force, the Janissaries, by enslaving and converting young men from the Balkans – some of whom also rose to positions of considerable political power. Both empires depended considerably on military expansion. For the Safavids this came to a rather abrupt halt after a major defeat by Ottoman forces. Ottoman expansion continued into the late 17th century, when two efforts to capture Vienna failed – leading to a prolonged period when Austrian and particularly Russian forces began to cut into Ottoman territory. Both empires found it difficult to adjust to the end of military growth.

Palace culture Both empires generated an elaborate palace culture, with a large harem of wives and concubines, who often contributed to an atmosphere of considerable intrigue. Safavid rule, particularly, deteriorated by the later 17th century thanks to the indulgent lifestyle. Both empires sponsored considerable artistic and cultural activity. Safavid rule helped establish Farsi as the dominant language of the region. Under the Ottomans, though Arabic and Persian were widely used, Turkish gradually gained ground.

Religion Initial Safavid rulers were deeply committed to Shia Islam, and made this the religion of state – a new element in Persian politics. Shia scholars were brought in from other areas. Religious and civil law were intertwined. The government supported Shia missionary efforts and a network of schools – in which the emperor was supposed to be praised on a weekly basis. Grants of land created an upper class dependent on the state, where religious loyalty was assumed. The Safavids were quite tolerant of most religious minorities, including Christians and Jews, but oppressed the Sunni population. Overall, religion and state became closely intertwined, a legacy that continues in this region today. For their part the Ottomans were Sunnis, and the conflict with the Safavids was in part a religious dispute. Ottoman sultans claimed the title of Caliph. Here too, religious minorities were tolerated, including an important Orthodox

Christian group, but the Shia minority was persecuted. Religious goals, around the distinct versions of Islam, loomed large for both empires. As the Safavid dynasty weakened, it was in fact briefly replaced by an Islamic republic, of Shia religious officials bent on a theocratic state, though this fell quickly to outside invasion.

Safavid administration The Safavid Shah, or emperor, maintained firm control over his administration in the early decades. Bureaucrats were recruited by merit, and carefully supervised (and not infrequently replaced) – this was not a hereditary aristocracy. Every office was overseen by an official who reported directly to the Shah. A prime minister served the Shah, and under him were specialized agencies responsible for revenues, the system of justice, and the military. Provincial and local administrators served under the central state. In cities, artisan and merchant guilds gained considerable power, introducing a somewhat democratic element into what was otherwise an autocratic system. Under the early Safavids, the government revived the Persian tradition of substantial public works, with highways and inns designed to encourage commerce., with guards employed to prevent brigandage. (Poor people were allowed to stay as long as they wished in the inns, without payment.)

Ottoman administration The Ottoman state defined its purposes as the expansion of Islam through conquest, internal security, and application of Islamic law (however, minority communities administered their own courts and laws). The Sultan was in charge of the state, and the office remained in a single dynasty, the House of Osman, throughout the empire's existence – an unusual dynastic span, with new sultans chosen from among the previous sultan's sons. Palace schools trained future administrators. A variety of offices served under the Sultan, with officials selected and supervised by the Grand Vizier, the chief officer with considerable powers independent of the Sultan. Provincial governors had great authority, and occasionally rebelled against central control. Local authority was considerable, even in law, and the empire frequently accommodated special local administrative traditions. The Ottomans paid more attention to the organization of the treasury and bureaucratic record-keeping than other Islamic regimes, and effectiveness in this category contributed greatly to the overall success of the empire. The government played a direct role in organizing settlers to underpopulated territories, expanding cultivation, and it also operated extensive public works. It did not, however, widely encourage large-scale capitalism, seeing the economy in terms of the financial and political interests of the state.

Limitations: a debate Some historians argue that despite great success, particularly for the Ottomans, the Middle Eastern Islamic empires must be faulted for failing to take adequate account of the growing dynamism of the neighboring European powers. Their empires traded actively with Europeans, giving their merchants special legal privileges in an atmosphere of free trade (a contrast with East Asian policy at the same time). But little account was taken of innovations in commercial practice or the rise of science. The Ottoman regime did not even allow a printing press to be set up in the empire for fear of its impact on Islamic orthodoxy (the first press was in fact for Christians). Sultans did import some European doctors, which was ironic since their knowledge was not noticeably superior to that of local physicians, but otherwise there was no significant cultural interchange. Whether this was a crucial failure, given the success of the regime, can be debated, but it would obviously weaken the empire's ability to respond to industrial Europe in the 19th century.

Study questions

1. What were the religious policies of the two empires? How did the empires help politicize the dispute between the Shia and Sunni versions of Islam?
2. What were the major functions of the state besides religion?
3. Should the empire be faulted for their failure to import more Western ideas and practices (as Russia was doing in this period)?

Further reading

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The Mughal Empire in India

Overview This was the third great Islamic empire during the post classical period. Like the others in the Middle East, it took shape initially through invasions of an outside group – in this case, Turkic Muslims – using guns made familiar in previous warfare. The empire developed and expanded fairly consistently during the 16th century and into the 17th, ultimately covering considerable territory in the subcontinent but never the whole. Decline set in the later 17th century, and the empire was moribund by the mid-18th, as India opened increasingly competition between French and British trading companies, each with government backing. The last Mughal holding collapsed entirely in the 1840s.

Structure Under the early emperors the government took on administrative features now familiar both in this region and in the Middle East. Several provinces (*Subah0* were established, each with a governor. Initially twelve in number, their ranks expanded with the empire itself. The Mughals operated from a number of different capital cities over time, and also from a large armed camp which highlighted the ongoing military emphasis..

Functions The government was active on a variety of front. Public works engagement was particularly impressive, with a massive road network and a specialized administrative department. . Standardization of currency also contributed to rapid economic growth. On the other hand, taxation rates, particularly for the peasantry, were oppressively high – and the requirement that they be paid in silver encouraged more market participation, which could be challenging. More informally, the Mughals encouraged considerable change in art and architecture (with the Taj Mahal a notable example), and even in cuisine, with new influences, particularly from Persia, interacting with Indian patterns.

Religion Ruling a majority Hindu population, early Mughal emperors were widely tolerant. Hindus were employed in the bureaucracy, and the government subsidized some temples and religious activities – while also supporting Islamic ventures. The Emperor Akbar was particularly noteworthy, summoning scholars from various religions and even projecting the possibility of a new, more encompassing faith.. Later emperors, however, began to see an explicit Islamic mission for the state. Bureaucratic recruitment narrowed, and there were outright attacks on Hindu buildings. This mixed record continues to be a matter of debate in Indian politics, with Hindu nationalists highlighting the examples of intolerance and violence (though the continued use of the Taj Mahal as a national symbol represents an interesting complexity). The religious issue also warrants comparison with the Islamic empires in the Middle East, where arguably the religious focus created certain policy limitations.

Role in decline Imperial decisions undoubtedly contributed to the surprisingly rapid decline of the dynasty by 1700. Hindu resistance grew, as did attacks by independent Hindu princes. The taxation rate became increasingly burdensome, and despite earlier growth the economy began to falter – though new British measure to limit Indian industrial imports did not help. Most obviously, the Emperor Aurangzeb simply pressed military expansion too far, creating a military structure that was unsustainable. As a result, the Mughal legacy consisted more clearly of cultural achievements and the mixed religious record than of durable changes to the system of government.

Study questions

1, What were the main functions of the Mughal government?

2. How did religious policy change, and with what results?

3. Why is the Mughal legacy currently a matter of political debate?

Further reading

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East Asia

Overview The early modern period did not see a huge change in the basic structure or purpose of imperial government in China, though there were some interesting developments and a few new problems. Two dynasties divided the period, the Ming and Qing; the latter was introduced by Manchurian rulers who however quickly adopted Chinese political characteristics without major disruption. Political innovation was greater in Japan, where the Tokugawa shogunate introduced greater internal peace and stability from approximately 1600 onward. Governments in both countries developed successful policies in dealing with Western traders (policies that were quite different from those of the Islamic empires and Russia), though Japan opted for greater isolation than China did.

Ming dynasty Until its decline in the mid-17th century, the Ming government provided an unusually stable period in Chinese history. Administration of the provinces was carefully organized, with officials responsible for civil and for military affairs, and for surveillance. Beneath the provincial level were prefectures and then smaller units, each with a chief appointed official. Several roving officials periodically checked on provincial activities, reporting to the imperial administration. At the top, six major divisions were responsible for justice, the military, public works, revenues, personnel and ritual. The Ming reestablished recruitment from the rigorous examination system, which in turn focused on Confucian texts. The government organized a network of schools and teachers to feed into this system, with teachers evaluated every nine years. At the same time, the exam format became increasingly stylized and the whole system encouraged a conservative intellectual approach.

Policy orientation Fairly in the dynasty, in 1439, the decision was taken to end the great expeditions through the Indian Ocean. The government concentrated instead on building the modern Great Wall, to prevent nomadic invasion of the sort that had occurred with the Mongols, plus building a great new capital in Beijing. While Chinese merchants continued to be active in Southeast Asia, China depended for wider trade on the growing activities of Western merchants. These were carefully regulated, confined to entry through the Portuguese-controlled port of Macau. The imperial court also interacted with Jesuit missionaries, esteemed for their knowledge of science and their advanced clocks; but there was no serious cultural exchange. Under the Ming even this connection was broken in the early 18th century. The Catholic Pope insisted that Jesuits pull back from adopting Chinese costumes and habits, and in retaliation the government turned against the missionaries and any Christian converts. Qing emperors also launched new territorial expansion, acquiring Tibet (in reaction to a new regime that seemed threatening) and in the northwest.

Qing dynasty The Qing innovated in administration primarily by having dual Manchu and Han officials in key offices. Otherwise the Ming apparatus was largely retained, though administration had to expand to the new territories where direct imperial and military control substituted for the normal regional apparatus. The bureaucratic examination system probably became more challenged, with candidates often trying to write examination answers out in advance, guessing at the questions which tended to be repetitious; and cheating may have increased. The Qing also expanded a Ming policy of celebrating women known for good and virtuous behavior, for example including widows who did not remarry, seeking to bolster the conservative Confucian family system. While Qing dynamism declined toward the end of the 18th century, this was still a viable regime; recent scholars have noted that its business and taxation policies were actually more favorable to economic activity than their counterparts in places like Britain. The results is a new debate over the extent to which Chinese government should be held accountable for the divide that was opening up with the increasingly dynamic early industrial economy of the West.

Tokugawa regime The Tokugawa clan gained control over most of Japan after victory in the endemic feudal wars, forming a government (under the figurehead emperor, who had virtually no real authority) in 1603. The regime was able to end internal conflict while retaining the feudal class in principle; each major feudal lord administered a province, but under some central authority; and some separate government officials operated as well, as the regime established a hierarchy of offices independent of the feudal system. The control of the central Shogun increasingly superseded separate feudal authority. And the central administration directly operated foreign policy, coinage, weights and measures, and public works.

The feudal lords pledged loyalty to the Shogun. But normally each regional administration had considerable leeway, even in taxation policy, while carrying out public works and maintaining military order. All of this was a substantial departure from the political system of earlier centuries, and it underwrote growing internal economic prosperity. At the same time, in keeping with the new political tone, Confucian ideas spread more widely, though the government also supervised Buddhist and Shinto activities.

Foreign policy for several decades prior to the Tokugawa, Portuguese trade and missionary activity had attracted considerable Japanese interest. Briefly under the Tokugawa a mission was actually sent to Spanish America, in the interests of trade. But in 1835 the regime pulled back, introducing the Seclusion Laws. . It feared the example of Spanish control of the Philippines, and the larger threats to Japanese culture and its feudal military structure. Christian missionaries were attacked. The regime decreed that only Chinese, Korean and Dutch ships could enter Japanese harbors, and then under strict limitations. Japanese were not allowed to travel abroad. For over two centuries the Tokugawa managed to make this policy work, without significant internal or external challenge.

Study questions

1. How did Japanese and Chinese foreign policies compare?
2. What were the main continuities, in China, from previous systems of government?
3. How was the Tokugawa shogunate able to establish greater internal stability?

Further reading

Conrad Totman, *Tokugawa Ieyau: Shogun* (Heian International, 1983)

Yonlin Jiang, *The Mandate of Heaven and the Great Ming Code* (University of Washington Press,2011)

Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton University Press, 2000)